Jeff Alexander
English 102
History Project
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Dancing the Night Away Back in the Day

On a warm, weekend night in the summer of 1938, twenty-year-old Bill Alexander was at home with nothing to do. Living with his grandmother in the small, southern Illinois town of Cutler, Bill had been instructed not to go to Winkelman's dance hall because the popular gathering place served alcohol. On that evening, however, young Bill disobeyed his grandmother and traveled to Winkelman's in search of a good time and friendly entertainment.

Upon his arrival at Winkelman's, conveniently located between the booming metropolises of Steeleville and Chester, Illinois, Bill dug deep into his suit pocket and paid his twenty-five cent admission fee. He then entered into the large hall filled with wooden benches, gorgeous women, and the typical sounds of 1930's orchestra music.

Sipping on five-cent bottles of orange soda pop and root beer, Bill enjoyed himself as he learned new moves on the dance floor and mingled with other young people out for an evening of good, clean, dance hall fun. As the night progressed, Bill had struck up a lively conversation with a dance partner named Gertrude. At the close of the evening, Gertrude invited Bill to come back the next week for another night of dancing and camaraderie.

A week of driving a coal truck quickly passed, and young

Bill once again made the short trip from Cutler to Winkelman's. As Bill walked around at the popular hang out, a stunning realization came upon him. Gertrude was nowhere to be found. Gertrude had stood him up.

As Bill continued to peer around the filled dance hall, looking for his dance partner from the previous week, an unfamiliar young lady approached him. She introduced herself as Irene Rabe, a friend of Gertrude's, and informed Bill that Gertrude would not be present that evening.

Young Bill didn't let that news ruin his evening. Rather, he proceeded to ask the young lady standing before him for a dance. Bill and Irene ended up dancing the night away and became acquainted with each other. At the close of the evening, Bill escorted Irene back to her home in Steeleville in his 1931 Chevy Coupe. As Irene left his car that night, the couple agreed that they would stay in touch.

Bill and Irene stayed in touch. Bill and Irene continued to enjoy evenings of dancing at Winkelman's. Bill and Irene continued in their courtship. And on Christmas evening of that same year, 1938, young Bill asked Rudolph Rabe if he could marry his daughter. Mr. Rabe answered the young man's request by saying, "Sure. As long as you take care of her."

Over the next three months, the engaged couple found a humble, two-room house in Steeleville. They also purchased $1,000 worth of furniture to put inside the building and transform a simple house into a home.

On April 8, 1939, Bill and Irene, along with Bill's cousin,

James and Irene's sister, Norma, crossed the mighty Mississippi River by ferry and entered into the neighboring state of Missouri. Missouri's laws at the time were different from Illinois' and did not require a waiting period or blood tests for a couple wishing to be wed.

So, on that cloudy and rainy spring day of 1939, Bill and Irene signed their marriage license at the county courthouse and asked for directions to the local Lutheran church.

The foursome approached the church grounds, knocked on the parsonage door, and met Pastor Lohman. Bill, a natural conversationalist, engaged in a good conversation with the minister before asking him if he would perform a small wedding ceremony. Rev. Lohman agreed to be the officiant.

"What are you doing right now?" asked Bill.

"Nothing," replied the minister.

"Then let's do it now," responded the anxious groom.

Around 11 o'clock in the morning, Bill and Irene exchanged their vows and were united in holy matrimony, right in the parsonage living room.

After a lunch of meat loaf at a local diner, the bride, groom, and their two witnesses returned back to Illinois by the ferry. Later that evening, Irene's mom made a large dinner for the new couple and invited family and friends to come over and celebrate.

Bill and Irene spent their first few nights together at Irene's family home in the heart of Steeleville. On April 11, 1939, only three days after their impromptu wedding, the

Alexanders moved into their first home as a happily married couple.

It is now almost sixty years later. Winkelman's dance hall is no more. Soda pop no longer costs five cents a bottle. The ferry to Perryville has been replaced by a suspension bridge.

It is now almost sixty years later, and I am pleased to call Bill and Irene Alexander my grandparents.